Hogan, Michael. *Abraham Lincoln and Mexico: A History of Courage, Intrigue and Unlikely Friendships.* San Diego, CA: EgretBooks.com, 2016.

On January 13, 1846, [President] Polk, in an effort to increase the pressure on the Mexicans to agree to a settlement, instructed Secretary of War William L. Marcy to give the critical order. "Advance and occupy, with the troops under your command, positions on or near the east bank of the Rio del Norte (Rio Grande) as soon as can be conveniently done." When American troops crossed the Nueces, Mexico was certain to consider her territory invaded, and, in the language of Secretary Marcy, as "the commencement of hostilities." General Taylor privately agreed, and in his letters noted that this action was "unnecessary and provocative." Nevertheless, he followed his orders.

The construction of fortifications on the Rio Grande was further evidence of US aggression, not only to the Mexicans but also to several members of Congress in the United States. One US Whig senator observed that ordering Taylor to cross the River Grande was "as much an act of aggression on our part as is a man's pointing a pistol at another's breast."

Opposition to the war was mixed. Abolitionists and those who believed that this conflict would create an opening for more slave states were among the most outspoken. The leaders of the Whig party who saw Polk's imperialist tendencies as contrary to America's founding principles were also quick in their response to Polk's war declaration. Peace societies and movements centered mainly in New England were vociferous in their opposition. For the majority of the country, however, the war was seen as a chance to expand into territory that was sparsely populated or settled mostly by Indio or Mestizo people whom they considered inferior. Manifest Destiny was the catchword of the day, from a newspaper editorial of John L. Sullivan. "More, more more!...till our national destiny is fulfilled…and the whole boundless continent is ours." It captured the prevalent belief that the States had the divine right to expand from "sea to shining sea."

There were some obvious impediments to unchecked expansion. As mentioned earlier, the border that the United States claimed for the new state of Texas was in Mexican territory. In addition, California, with its attractive ports in San Francisco and San Diego, was Mexican, as was Santa Fe, the necessary link in the overland route. And, while the doctrine of Manifest Destiny allowed for the displacement of Indians, and the Monroe Doctrine could justify sharp dealings with European powers, Mexico was now an independent republic, and one which had thrown off the chains of Spanish colonialism just thirty-five years earlier. How could the US possibly justify an unprovoked attack on a sister republic?

The answer would be two-fold. First, that allegiance to the Catholic Church was evidence of Mexicans' ignorance and degradation. Second, the mixed blood of the people, the large numbers of Indians among them, and their three hundred years of Spanish dominance made them unfit for self-government. It was the US mission to save them for themselves.

… The Arkansas cavalry, known as the "Rackensackers," were described as "wild and reckless fellows." Like many volunteers convinced of their racial superiority they

had "the firm belief that their own State could whip the world and Mexico in particular." When one of their men was found killed in an ambush, they captured a group of Mexican peasants and raped and killed indiscriminately. As many as thirty men, women, and children had been brutally murdered when a company of Illinois volunteers finally arrived at the scene to restrain them. No one was prosecuted because General Taylor was unable to identify the guilty parties. He initially ordered two companies of the regiment back to the Rio Grande, but changed his mind when the battle of Buena Vista became imminent.

The Texans who entered the war with a sworn hatred for the Mexicans were noted for their indiscriminate acts of murder and vengeance. The Texas Rangers, wrote one American observer, "spare none but shoot down every [Mexican] they meet." General Taylor remarked that the Texans were "too licentious to do much good" but that he was "unsuccessful in [his] attempts to discipline them."

Some degree of dehumanization is to be expected in any war, but the level and intensity of it in the Mexican War was virulent. Perhaps the only comparable contemporary example would be My Lai during the Vietnam War. After the massacre at My Lai was revealed, however, there was moral outrage back home, the offenders were brought to trial, and soul-searching on the part of the nation began. In contrast, the atrocities in Mexico by American volunteers were ongoing and commonplace. They were widely reported in the press and formally documented by the federal officers. Still, they continued. Commanders felt powerless to prevent them and neither the public nor the politicians back home seemed perturbed.

The invasion of Veracruz was preceded by five days of American bombardment. Approximately 6,700 US artillery shells struck the city, or roughly 1,340 shells every 24 hours. Mexican casualties were estimated at 1,100 – at least 500 of them civilians. Despite pleas from the foreign consuls and from the Bishop, no pause in the shelling was granted by [General] Scott so that women, children, and foreign nationals could be evacuated. A contemporary observer, Colonel Ethan Hitchcock, noted:

> I shall never forget the horrible fire of our mortars…going with dreadful certainty and bursting with sepulchral tones often in the center of private dwellings – it was awful. I shudder to think of it.

When news of the shelling arrived in the United States and Europe, people were repulsed by the indiscriminate bombing. It was after reading newspaper accounts of this atrocity that Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his taxes in Concord, Massachusetts, and was later to write his famous essay "On Civil Disobedience," which outlined his philosophy of nonviolent resistance to immoral acts of a government. It was to give the anti-war movement in New England an added boost and lead to many editorials of which Santa Anna was aware, and which would encourage the Mexican leader to generate broadsides encouraging defections among sympathetic immigrant soldiers. One example of those who became convinced they were fighting on the wrong side were the more than two hundred soldiers of the Saint Patrick's Battalion (Los San Patricios), a group of Irish, Scots, and German Catholics who left the US Army, and joined the Mexicans.

Now, in December of 1847, Lincoln had finally taken his seat in Congress and had an opportunity to take the floor and express his views. There in a lawyerly fashion, he methodically assailed Polk's justification for the war and, in a series of resolutions (which were essentially rhetorical questions), he proceeded to expose the false premises upon which the war was commenced, the unjust and rapacious nature of the president's policies, and the untruths which continued to form the underpinnings for the continuation of the conflict.

It is clear that repetition of "American blood, shed on American soil" was intrinsic to the argument of Polk that the war was justified and that it was constitutional. If Lincoln could show that the blood was **not** shed on American soil, then the war would have been unconstitutional, an over-reaching of presidential power, and also unnecessary and unjust. That is, he would be able to show that Polk, by sending General Taylor's troops from the Rio Nueces to the banks of the Rio Grande at the direction of the Secretary of War, had invaded Mexican territory and preemptively started a war with a neighboring republic.

In 1947, one hundred years after the Occupation of Mexico City, President Harry Truman went to Mexico to lay a wreath on the graves of the Niños Heroes at the Castle of Chapultepec and apologize for the invasion of their country. He was the first American president to travel to Mexico, and the comments he made then are worth returning to today.

> International relations have traditionally been compared to a chess game in which each nation tries to outwit and checkmate the other. I cannot accept that comparison with respect to the relations between your country and mine, Mr. President. The United States and Mexico are working together for the mutual benefit of their peoples and the peace of the world. You have made me feel, what I could not have doubted in any case, that I stand here, in the midst of the great people of Mexico, as a trusted friend and a welcome guest. To you and to the people of Mexico I bring a message of friendship and trust from the people of the United States. Though the road be long and wearisome that leads to a good neighborhood as wide as the world, we shall travel it together. Our two countries will not fail each other.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does the Mexican American War (or the American Intervention in Mexico as it is known in Mexico) reflect the attitudes of the US people in regards to geographic expansion, race, and religion?
2. Why is it important to highlight the opposition to this war, as expressed by then Congressman Lincoln?